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To "Penney Trujillo" <Trujillo.Penney@epamail.epa.gov>
cc
bcc
Subject Fw: The Missoulain: Baucus helps deliver grant for Libby

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Wendy Chipp

----- Original Message -----

From: Wendy Chipp
Sent: 05/22/2009 08:57 AM MDT
Subject: The Missoulain: Baucus helps deliver grant for Libby

Baucus helps deliver grant for Libby

By CHARLES S. JOHNSON Missoulain State Bureau

HELENA - The federal government is making a \$6 million health grant to Libby to help people suffering from asbestos-related illness and to possibly accelerate its declaration of a public health emergency there, U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., said Thursday.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has already declared the Libby area a Superfund site, but not yet a public health emergency.

That health emergency designation would expand the environmental cleanup of the area and broaden health coverage for those suffering from asbestos-related disease.

Baucus said he has been fighting for years to get a public health emergency declared in Libby, but the Bush administration blocked that attempt. He said he is confident the Obama administration will do so based on sound science and "to right the sins of the last administration."

"I made a promise that I intend to keep," he said. "I have every confidence that a public health emergency will be declared in Libby. We won't stop pushing until that happens."

More than 200 people have died and hundreds of others suffer from asbestos contamination blamed on W.R. Grace & Co.'s now-shuttered vermiculite mine in Libby.

Baucus called the \$6 million grant "vital to folks up in Libby who are victims of asbestos-related disease."

In Libby, reaction to the grant was highly positive.

Karol Spas-Otte, director of nurses for the Lincoln County Health Department, was pleased to learn of the availability of the federal grants, saying: "The need is here."

"We're just very excited about something like this coming through after the trial," Spas-Otte said. "This is some very good news that counteracts the disappointment everyone felt after the trial."

She was referring to the recent acquittal, in U.S. District Court in Missoula, of W.R. Grace & Co., and three of its former executives of all criminal charges related to the asbestos poisoning in Libby.

Libby Mayor Doug Roll called the grant "great news" and said the city welcomes anything that Sens. Jon Tester and Baucus can do.

"Both of them are working hard for us, especially Senator Baucus," Roll said. "He has been on this issue for years. This is just the latest thing."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will announce the grant Friday for the Lincoln County Health Department and at least three other health care entities. They include the Center for Asbestos-Related Diseases Clinic, Lincoln County Health Center, St. John's Lutheran Hospital and the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

The grants would go for screening and providing health care services for people with asbestos-related illness.

"I have talked with the head of HHS, Kathleen Sebelius, and the head of the EPA, Lisa Jackson, and they both know how important it is to help the folks in Libby," Baucus said. "We have been working for months together to figure out how to best help the folks affected by this tragedy."

Since news stories linked widespread deaths and illness to exposure to asbestos fibers at the defunct W.R. Grace & Co. mine, Baucus said he has visited Libby more than 20 times and brought many federal Cabinet secretaries, helped save the CARD Clinic and pressed the EPA to keep the cleanup moving forward.

He called the latest grant another step in his decadelong fight to bring justice to Libby people "who were poisoned at the hands of Grace."

Baucus is chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over HHS, and is a senior member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over the EPA